DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 365 945 CS 011 537

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TITLE Parents and Teachers Working Together toward Literacy: Views from the Past and Goals for the Future.
PUB DATE Dec 93
NOTE 31p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Reading Conference (43rd, Charleston, SC, December 1-4, 1993).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Historical Materials (060)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Educational History; Elementary Secondary Education; Literacy; Literature Reviews; *Parent Participation; Parent School Relationship; *Parent Teacher Cooperation; *Reading Research; Textbooks

ABSTRACT

Both teachers and parents throughout American history have expressed concern about communication between school and home, and have wondered what role each should play in educating children. John Dewey and Edmund Huey, early in the 20th century, believed that home influences were very important for reading development. Starting in the late 1940s, American educators' attitudes toward parental involvement in literacy education moved from tentative interest to great concern. Literacy methods textbooks, strands of literacy research, school district programs, and government funding both reflected and affected these changing views. Through the 1950s, the topic of parental involvement gained an improved but still quite limited place in reading methods textbooks. Literacy research conducted in the 1960s and 1970s continued to support the development of parent involvement programs and helped steer their direction. Much of the parent involvement related to federally funded school programs was guided by the belief that schools must compensate for poor children's "culturally deprived" backgrounds before literacy learning could take place. The 1980s were a time of increased interest in parent involvement, which appears to be growing even stronger during the 1990s. Current textbooks usually discuss the value of communicating with parents but sometimes provide only limited suggestions. Schools in the 1990s are working toward an improved relationship with families and communities, but connections between schools and families are not easily achieved. (A chart listing the historical trends in family/school relationships is included; contains 87 references.) (RS)

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ED 365 945

Parents and Teachers Working Together Toward Literacy: Views From the Past and Goals for the Future

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Paper presented at the National Reading Conference

Charleston, South Carolina, December, 1993.

CS011537

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Parents and teachers working together toward literacy: Views from the past and goals for the future

Before schooling in the United States became commonplace and compulsory, parents and the extended family were the primary educators of children, teaching basic life skills - how to care for a home, raise children and earn a living. If family members were literate, they frequently taught reading and writing as well. Colonial children who did attend school often experienced a close relationship between home and school. Schools were usually small, and families frequently were expected to take turns providing room, board and firewood for teachers (Webb, McCarthy, & Thomas, 1988).

As America became industrialized and schools grew larger and more comprehensive, however, relationships between parents and teachers often became distant. Today's teachers and parents express concern about communication between school and home. Both may wonder what role each should play in educating the child. In this article we provide a view of where current American attitudes toward family/school relationships have come from and how these attitudes have changed over time. We also discuss what recent research in different communities tells us about the essential role families can play in helping their children grow as readers and writers.

Early Views Toward Family Involvement

John Dewey and Edmund Huey believed that home influences were very important for reading development. Both felt that

children who learned to read at home were more natural, fluent readers than those who learned to read at school (Dewey, 1898; Huey, 1908). In a teaching methods text, Huey (1908) suggested that children who had a "good home" and parents who could "give them a little time every day" would benefit by staying home until age eight, rather than entering school at six (p. 336). He believed that schools should instruct parents in ways to assist their children's natural literacy learning at home, but recognized that parents were unlikely to practice home teaching: "...many parents do not have the time or intelligence, and the schools are not yet prepared to assist them effectively" (Huey, 1908, p. 336).

Huey's belief that many parents lacked intelligence was shared by many other educators of his time. Schools in the early 1900's, especially those in northern urban areas, were experiencing an enormous influx of European immigrants and black families migrating from rural southern areas (Garraty, 1966). Many school people believed that these children (and their parents) had low intelligence, in part because language and cultural differences often resulted in below-average scores on the newly-invented IQ tests (Tyack, 1974). Language differences were considered to adversely affect literacy learning: If the child's parents did not speak "good English," it was thought the student would get grammar "twisted," which would cause learning problems (Hildreth, 1936). In addition, parents' knowledge and experiences were often thought to hinder rather than benefit

their child's education.

Teachers were expected to "Americanize" children from these vastly different cultural backgrounds and adjust them to the middle-class norms of the school (Tyack, 1974). Some believed that schools would have to educate the family to reach the child. One observer of schools in New York in 1903, for example, wrote: "If it hopes to Americanize a school population chiefly of foreign parentage ...the school system...must at the same time educate their families, and in a measure the public school must be to them family as well as school" (Tyack, 1974, p. 231). Efforts to educate families about helping improve their children's literacy development were not common, however. We could locate no reading methods textbooks of the time period that provided suggestions for teachers about involving parents. The majority either completely ignored parents (Harris, Donovan & Alexander, 1927; Klapper, 1916, 1921), or referred to parents under sections relating to reading problems (Adams, Gray & Reese, 1949; Durrell, 1940; Hildreth, 1936; McKee, 1948; Stanger & Donohue, 1937). For example, Durrell connected parents to problems of motivation in reading:

> Often parents appear to have allowed their children to acquire undesirable habits... poor home conditions may account for inattention...when home conditions are unsatisfactory...the child's emotional life is empty, [but] a well-motivated reading program may become an oasis in an otherwise barren emotional desert (1940, p. 99-100).

A few educators did seek to bridge the gap between parents and the school, however. Tyack (1974), in an extensive historical review, described schools in Harlem and Sacramento which sought to prevent bigotry and made numerous school - community connections in the 1920's and 1930's. However, urban school administrators, who came primarily from white middle-class backgrounds, tended to view family influence negatively (Tyack, 1974). A Cincinnati principal in 1928, for example, described the African-American community of her students as characterized by "crowded living conditions, false standards of conduct and general lack of intelligence" (Tyack, 1974, p. 219). Trends in reading instruction also appear to have negatively affected attitudes toward family involvement in the first part of the 20th century. Studies of scientific management and efficiency in business and industry influenced the belief teachers should be trained in "scientific pedagogy" (Venezky, 1984, p. 17). School efficiency became a major goal, fueled by the scientific management movement in combination with the rise of behaviorism in the field of psychology (Skinner, 1953, 1954; Watson, 1913, 1925). Reading instruction came to be viewed as a technical skill, requiring teaching and testing of isolated skills in a particular sequence (Shannon, 1989). Methods textbooks from this era focused upon preparing teachers for this technical task, with the implicit assumption that parents would not be knowledgeable enough to help. In addition, reading readiness was generally thought to develop through general maturation, rather than

through specific instruction or activities, so neither parents nor preschool teachers were generally encouraged to attempt literacy-related activities with young children (Durkin, 1966). Textbook authors urged teachers to rely on readiness tests and cautioned that parents could harm children by urging them to read too soon (Adams, Gray & Reese, 1949; Stanger & Donohue, 1937). Adams, Gray & Reese, for example, gave teachers this warning: "[P]arents... will find it hard to realize that irreparable harm might be done to their child if he is forced to tackle that job [reading] before reliable tests indicate that he is ready to do so" (1949, p. 158).

Between the late 1800's and the mid-twentieth century the gap between home and school widened, and educators became less interested in the family's role in literacy development. Schools became larger and more diverse. Students and their families often came from backgrounds vastly different from the educators running their schools, and teachers were taught that differences in language and culture were a hindrance to learning. It is important to note, however, that although schools in this time period often viewed parents as unable to assist children in becoming literate, many families likely made independent efforts which positively influenced their children's reading and writing growth. Immigrant and minority families and communities often struggled to hold on to their language and heritage through churches, clubs and their own schools, which met after school or on weekends (J. Matuska, personal communication, June 6, 1992).

Thus, families and schools may have both been pursuing children's literacy development, but they were usually doing so separately.

Changing Attitudes-The Late 1940's and 1950's

Starting in the late 1940's, American educators' attitudes toward parental involvement in literacy education moved from tentative interest to great concern. Literacy methods textbooks, strands of literacy research, school district programs and government funding both reflected and affected these changing views.

Reading methods texts published soon after World War II took a greater interest in parental involvement, although a negative tone toward parents often still remained. Witty (1949), for example, described important contributions parents could make by fostering their child's mental health and vocabulary and by providing an abundance of reading materials at home. However, Witty admonished parents to improve: "At four, the child is an inveterate questioner. Parents need to exhibit greater patience and sympathy at this time than formerly, for they will be surfeited by questions" (1949, p. 91).

Adams, Gray and Reese's text (1949) discouraged parental help in a chapter entitled "Home Help Undesirable," which warned teachers that first grade reading books should not be taken home because the child might read ahead (or listen to the stories) and lose the incentive to read in school. On the other hand, later in the text teachers are advised to solicit parental help when older students experience problems. The type of involvement

encouraged, however, such as asking probing questions about parents' home reading habits, appears to be blaming parents rather than educating them or including them in any systematic, meaningful way.

Through the 1950's, the topic of parental involvement gained an improved but still quite limited place in reading methods textbooks. Durrell (1956) advised teachers to look at their own planning instead of blaming parents for student inattentiveness and suggested that children read aloud to their parents, modifications of his former negative stance toward parents (1940). However, he also argued that parents may be partly to blame for children's school problems: "[P]arents have allowed their children to acquire undesirable attitudes toward school work...poor home conditions may account for inattention" (Durrell, 1956, p. 136).

Other texts from the 1950's suggested benefits of home-school cooperation, but provided very limited advice about how to achieve it. McKim (1955), for example, suggested that parents and teachers share information about children and teaching methods; Betts (1957) advised educating parents about reading readiness, but made no suggestions about how to do so. In response to a need for more positive suggestions for parent involvement, several educators wrote guide books to help parents understand their children's reading development (Goldenson, 1957; Larrick, 1958).

Research on early reading conducted beginning in the 1950's

also gave strength to the growing interest in the family's role in literacy development. Durkin (1966), for example, reported that before 1957,

> the topic of early reading seemed to have been neglected almost to the point of total omission...[because] ...questions and discussions about readiness...continued to focus on maturation, mental age and readiness testing. Too often overlooked was the possibility that changes in instruction might affect a child's readiness to read (1966, p. 9).

Beginning in the late 1950's, however, research interest in the effect of various home activities on early reading development grew. One important line of research, which continued through the 1970's, found significant correlations between home storybook reading and various factors related to reading achievement (Sulzby & Teale, 1991).

Trends in the 1960's and 1970's

Literacy research conducted in the 1960's and 70's continued to support the development of parent involvement programs and helped to steer their direction. Durkin's studies of early readers (1966) helped to dismiss the prevailing notion that parents should avoid encouraging their children to read and write before school instruction began. Durkin found that early readers tended to have family members who served as literate models, read aloud to and interacted with the child and provided reading and writing materials. Durkin's study, combined with others (Plessas

& Oakes, 1964; Sutton, 1964) provided a well-respected research base to support parental involvement in literacy development.

Federal programs, such as those initiated during the "War on Poverty," also spurred the development of many new parent involvement programs during this time period. Federally-funded early childhood and compensatory education programs usually required parent involvement, but this requirement was interpreted in differing ways. Some programs recruited parents as paid auxiliaries; others requested voluntary parental support, provided educational programs for parents, tried to influence parents, or got them politically involved. Reports of parent involvement ranged from enthusiastic to critical. In some programs parents were integrally involved, and their enthusiasm drew the community into the program (Broman, 1966; Liddle, Rockwell, & Sacadat, 1967). The "Follow Through" program, for example, reported over 90% parent satisfaction and 95% staff satisfaction (Hodges et al., 1980). Other programs, however, bypassed parents, gave them misleading information or put minimal effort into the parent involvement component (Meier, 1966).

Much of the parent involvement related to federally-funded school programs was guided by the belief that schools must compensate for poor children's "culturally deprived" backgrounds before literacy learning could take place. Parents whose language and culture differed from American middle-class norms were thought to deprive their children by causing low intelligence, poor abstract thinking, and deficient language

patterns (McPhail, 1982). This view, sometimes called a "deficit model," was not much different from educators' views in the early part of the century and influenced both research and practice. For example, one study of a program designed to teach poor mothers how to read stories to their children asserted, without offering documentation, that the mothers were "deficient in communication skills" and required a program which would improve their "verbal functioning" (Swift, 1970, p. 368).

Many reading methods textbooks of the time period also reflected this deficit model. Smith and Dechant (1961) outlined a commonly-held view of the relationship among socioeconomic status, intelligence and reading: "The differences in intelligence are not surprising when one considers the intellectual stimulation possible in the upper-class home as compared with the dearth of stimulation in the lower-class home" (pg. 70). They also connected dialect and language differences with reading problems: "Inaccuracies of pronunciation learned in their homes also may bar them from effective communication and thus reduce still further the stock of meanings that they can take to the task of learning to read" (p. 103). Harris (1970) concurred: "Children who come from homes of low cultural level do not have normal opportunities to develop an adequate language background... they often find it hard to progress in reading even when they have normal intelligence. If they are dull - and many of them are - they are doubly handicapped in their schoolwork" (p. 33). Dechant (1970) summarized the deficit view explicitly:

> [L]ess privileged children...have lower IQ's, are less proficient in language... and are less interested in school...They are wise in the ways of the street but are often not interested in cultural opportunities in the world about them. Their cultural horizons rarely extend beyond city alleys, and, because of this, they cannot bring meaningful concepts to the symbols on the printed page (pp. 41-42).

One result of the deficit view was differential advice about involvement for poor and middle-income parents. Some encouraged parental assistance only if the parents were college-educated (Chall, 1967). By the late 1970's, however, other educators recognized that building bridges between low-income homes and the school was important for learning:

> It is important to recognize that the presence of parents in the school not only provides more adults to teach reading or offer help or support to children but also transforms the <u>culture</u> of the school. With these black mothers present, there is no way that the curriculum and environment could remain unchanged... It feels like home (Lightfoot, 1978, p. 173, emphasis in the original).

As in earlier times, views about reading instruction also may have influenced views toward parents. Chall (1967), reported that phonics advocates recommended that parents help their children, but with teacher guidance; linguistic experts believed parents should teach; the language experience proponents stressed

the benefits of parents reading aloud and answering informal questions; and the "autotelic" experts, precursors of computer-aided instruction, emphatically opposed any parental help. Some methods textbooks also reflected confusion about appropriate parental roles. Heilman (1977), for example, warned that reading failure connected with pressure from parents and teachers could lead to negative emotional reactions. Stott (1974) recognized the dilemma of parents knowing their child needed help, but being advised not to attempt teaching at home; he cautioned that only parents with suitable personality, temperament and training should try to teach their own children.

Nevertheless, other methods textbooks began to stress the importance of parental involvement. Harris (1962, 1970) suggested that parents read aloud and model reading for their children; Bond and Wagner (1966) also discussed the importance of pleasant reading-related experiences at home. Gans (1963), in probably the most progressive textbook supporting parent involvement of the time period, addressed both teachers and parents because she believed that cooperation would lead to richly literate lives for children.

Changing Views: 1980's to the Present

The 1980's were a time of vastly increased interest in parent involvement, which appears to be growing even stronger during the 1990's. Different types of research supported a new view of families, their relationship with schools and their importance in their child's literacy development. In addition,

numerous local districts tried programs designed to involve and include parents. Literacy methods textbooks and journal articles reflected these strong developments in both research and practice.

The trend begun in the 1970's to look at the relationship between culture and schooling in a new way has continued strongly to the present. Naturalistic, in-depth studies about language, culture, schools and learning gave voice to the perspectives of both families and teachers and challenged the "cultural deficit" view held by many educators. For example, Labov (1970) and other linguists strongly disputed the belief that minority dialects are symptomatic of language deprivation. Rather, these linguists argued that all dialects serve the social functions of language and are equally systematic and complex (Eller, 1989). Additional studies indicated that some educational problems of minority or poor youth may relate to cultural or social class differences which were not understood by teachers in the predominantly white middle-class school environment (Au et al., 1986; Banks, 1988).

Naturalistic studies provided helpful information about relationships between schools and families by going beyond simple correlations among race, socioeconomic status and achievement. For example, Lightfoot described communication barriers between teachers and lower-income parents (1978); Clark explored family/school interactions which related to the success or failure of low-income black children (1983); anthropologists from the Hawaiian KEEP (Kamehameha Early Education Program) program

found differences between learning styles encouraged by native Hawaiian families and the local schools (Au et al., 1986); and Heath (1983) found differences in ways parents in different southern communities interacted with their children during storybook reading, which correlated with later differences in reading achievement.

Some experts, however, cautioned that a focus on cultural differences, although helpful for understanding some characteristics, may blur important within-group differences (Banks, 1988). Other writers rejected both the deficit and difference models as representative of "blame the victim" mentalities (McPhail, 1982). Goldenberg (1987, 1989), in an extensive study of low-income Hispanic children, emphasized the importance of looking for areas of congruence between home and school. Goldenberg found that families and teachers both valued education highly and were willing to help children become literate. However, this common understanding often went unrecognized by teachers, who infrequently asked parents to help. Even without support or encouragement from the school parents assisted their children's reading growth directly through tutoring (Goldenberg, 1987) and also indirectly by influencing their reading group placement (Goldenberg, 1989). There is also evidence that some teachers may still hold the "deficit" view toward children from minority cultural backgrounds (Eller, 1989); this may provide a partial explanation for continuing difficult family/school relationships, and is a topic which needs more

exploration.

A few programs attempted to improve literacy by replicating some elements of the home culture in the school. Au and her colleagues (1986) reported improved reading scores when the literacy instruction of young native Hawaiian children was modified to more closely resemble their home learning activities. Other literacy programs began to use cooperative learning strategies (Slavin, 1983), partially because it was thought these strategies would be more effective for children whose cultures emphasize cooperation rather than competition (Baruth & Manning, 1992). Heath (1991) points out that paradoxically, some skills valued in the work place of the late 20th century, such as collaborative skills, are emphasized in many minority cultures but are often discouraged by schools. New teaching/learning models developed to respond to workplace demands, then, may also better serve the needs of a culturally diverse student population.

Changing schools to match the home culture may not always be considered desirable, however. Heath (1983) found, for example, that both parents and the church in one low-income white southern community discouraged interpretive reading. Teachers in the school had difficulty teaching the children to read inferentially and write imaginatively. Teachers may value and be required by American mainstream society to encourage the development of abilities which are disconsonant with the child's culture. In a extensive review of research on cross-cultural features related

to literacy, Heath summarizes:

> ...the goal is not to use ... knowledge about minorities' ways of using language and habits of learning to tailor classrooms to fit the daily habits of each minority group...[but] to incorporate some of these additional ways in order to facilitate learning about learning....Students who can participate in a range of opportunities for different types of learning...will have the chance to adapt their learning habits to future needs and conditions" (1991, p. 21, emphasis in the original).

Programs designed to increase parent involvement in education have varied tremendously in their focus and purpose during the past 15 years. Some brought parents into the school for the dual purpose of improving adult and children's literacy development (Nickse, Speicker & Buchat, 1988) or to teach parents strategies for tutoring their child at home (Corno, 1980; Mehran & White, 1988; Mundre & McCormick, 1989; Winter & Rouse, 1990). Most studies reported positive gains when parents participated "fully," although this was sometimes a very difficult goal to attain (Mehran & White, 1988; Wepner & Caccavale, 1991).

Once again, trends in reading instruction have strongly affected educators' views toward parent involvement. Research in linguistics, sociology and reading converged during the 1980's to suggest that children can become literate as part of a natural process that evolves from earlier language learning. Often called the "whole language" philosophy, this view recognizes

parents and family as the child's first literacy teachers. Home activities such as reading aloud, providing young children access to writing and reading materials, modeling literacy activities and providing purposes for reading and writing are considered vital to the child's literacy development (Goodman, 1986; Vacca, Vacca & Gove, 1991). Teachers are encouraged to make classroom environments more similar to home environments which support literacy development. In addition, teachers are asked to encourage and value home literacy activities (Hill, 1989), to share with parents research which highlights the specific benefits and uses of common home literacy practices (Silvern, 1985), and to inform parents about good children's literature (Warren, Prater & Griswold, 1990). Fredericks and Rasinski (1990) encourage teachers to listen to what parents have to say as well, by including parents' observations in naturalistic assessments of children's reading.

Textbooks published in the late 1980's usually discussed the value of communicating with parents and involving them in the school, but sometimes provided only limited suggestions of how to do so (Gillett & Temple, 1986; Vacca, Vacca & Gove, 1987). Books published in the early 1990's, however, have shown a dramatic increase in specific advice for teachers on ways to involve parents (Barr & Johnson, 1991; Blair, Turner, & Schaudt, 1992; Gunning, 1992; Ruetzel & Cooter, 1992). Authors that advocate whole language philosophy give especially complete instructions for parent involvement because of its focus on connecting the

language, culture and learning of the home and school. In addition, whole language teachers typically answer many parental questions when implementing their literacy program (Weaver, 1988).

Future Directions

It appears that schools in the 1990's are working toward an improved relationship with families and communities. Many teachers recognize that parents and family members are children's first literacy teachers and that they can provide valuable continuing support of their children's literacy development through the school years. Textbooks and research reports are providing numerous suggestions for improving communication and cooperation between parents and teachers.

Connections between schools and families are not easily achieved, however. Although research has shown that parents and teachers often share values about the importance of education and literacy (Baruth & Manning, 1992), differing perspectives may cause distrust (Lightfoot, 1978). In a recent midwestern study, Linek and Rasinski (1991) found that although 90% of the teachers in their survey believed parent involvement was important, most viewed communication in one way: from teacher to parent.

Both teachers and parents may have role expectations and anxieties from past experiences that affect their relationships and block effective communication (Bricklin, 1970; Lightfoot, 1978). More research about teachers', parents' and children's views of family involvement would help to guide positive program

development. Efforts to help parents and teachers discuss and overcome communication difficulties are necessary.

An additional concern is that many American families continue to struggle with the devastating effects of poverty. Families who are facing daily concerns about food and shelter may find it difficult or impossible to participate in parent involvement programs which would help their child's literacy development. Slavin, Madden, Karweit, Livermon & Dolan (1990) have reported promising preliminary results from a Baltimore public school program which provides a "Family Support Team" to assist families with both educational and social problems. More studies on programs that provide a range of family support would be very helpful.

Over the past 100 years, American schools have changed dramatically. In the early 1900's, Edmund Huey stressed the importance of involving parents in children's reading development, but cautioned that most schools were not prepared to effectively assist them (1908). This historical overview provides a glimpse of the journey we have traveled since that time and evidences a need for continued improvement in communication between parents and teachers. The literacy of all of our children depends on it.

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United States Historical Trends in Family/School Rationships

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National Reading Conference, Charleston, SC, 1993

Period	Historical/Social Events	Educational Trends	Family/School Relationships
Until the Early 19th Century	Growing population/mostly Western European and African-American (slave)	*Many children were taught at home *Most schools served an elite; culture of parents/teachers often similar	Most education was the province of the family and religious organizations.
mid-1800's to early 1900's	*Massive eastern-European immigration and rural African-American migration to U.S. cities *Industrialization	*Public schools became more common and larger *Children often came from different cultural backgrounds than teachers, esp. in urban areas.	*E. Huey and J.Dewey said many children could learn to read best at home; however, Huey also said parents often did not have the time, intelligence or school support to teach their own children.
1920-early 1950's	*Continued immigration (at a slowed pace) *The Great Depression *Second World War and Cold War	*Scientific management movement. *Tracking based on IQ and achievement tests. *Reading instruction viewed as highly technical *Readiness thought to develop only through maturation *Research about family influence very rare.	*Methods texts ignored parents or warned teachers that parents' efforts could harm children *Many educators considered parents' "foreign" cultures a hindrance to learning.

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Period	Historical/Social Events	Educational Trends	Family/School Relationships
1950's - 1970's	*Post-war economic boom *National interest in improved education inspired by Sputnik *Civil rights movement/School desegregation *Vietnam era	*Strengthening of basal reader movement *Federal "War on Poverty" programs required parental involvement efforts *Research on parent influence increased: Durkin's seminal study of early readers showed importance of parents (1966); important line of research on home storybook reading was developed.	*Methods texts gave increased, but still limited encouragement of parent/school connections. *Some programs began to stress the importance of parental involvement *Strong "deficit" view affected relationships between schools and diverse families
late 1970's to 1980's	*Greatly increased immigration from non-European countries. *Increased official emphasis on multicultural understanding.	*Bilingual/ESL programs growing nationwide. *Literacy research provided strong support for valuing child's culture and the home literacy environment.	*Literacy experts encouraged a wide-variety of home/school connections. However, studies report difficulty with implementation.
1990's	*Many communities are becoming highly diverse. *Public concern about educational standards and U.S. economic competitiveness. *Social problems (poverty, drugs, etc.) are very serious in some areas.	*"Whole language" movement spreads dramatically *Teachers asked to integrate curriculum areas *Many schools have highly diverse populations.	*Advice for teachers about ways to involve families increased greatly in textbooks and articles. *Although school/family relationships are considered crucial, there is evidence that teachers and families often remain distant.